Author's response to reviews

Title: Perceived pros and cons of smoking and quitting in hard-core smokers: a focus group study.

Authors:

    Jeroen Bommelé (bommele@ivo.nl)
    Tim M Schoenmakers (schoenmakers@ivo.nl)
    Marloes Kleinjan (M.Kleinjan@pwo.ru.nl)
    Barbara van Straaten (straaten@ivo.nl)
    Elske Wits (wits@ivo.nl)
    Michelle Snelleman (snelleman@ivo.nl)
    Dike van de Mheen (vandemheen@ivo.nl)

Version: 3
Date: 29 January 2014

Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Dr. Aguirre,

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to improve our manuscript entitled “Perceived pros and cons of smoking and quitting in hard-core smokers: a focus group study.” and re-submit it to your journal.

We thank you and the referees for their positive feedback on the strengths of our paper. The comments and suggestions have been of great value for the revision of our manuscript. We hope we addressed the issues and suggestions adequately and to your and the referees’ satisfaction.

In the revised version of our manuscript we have highlighted the changes. Below, we have provided a summary of the referees’ comments with responses to each point made.

Yours sincerely (on behalf of all authors),

Jeroen Bommelé, MSc,
IVO Addiction Research Institute
Heemraadsingel 194,
3021 DM, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
bommele@ivo.nl
Tel: +31-10-4253366 Fax: +31-10-2763988
Referee 1

Comment 1
This is an interesting, well designed, and well conducted study.

1. The background is quite descriptive and lengthy. It seems to need some tightening

2. The current study (pages 4 and 5) is rather a mix of background and methods. Relevant parts can be removed either to background or methods

Response
We thank the referee for his compliments and his useful comments on revising the background. We agree with the referee that the background, and the current study section in particular, is quite lengthy. We therefore shortened this section by removing the following sentences:

'It is therefore imperative that we gain more knowledge about these cognitive determinants of smoking in hard-core smokers.' (page 4)

'These ambivalent beliefs could then be used in a clinical setting, such as treatments with motivational interviewing [21, 22], or in the development of interventions specifically targeting the hard-core smoking population.' (page 4)

'We conducted focus groups with Dutch current and former hard-core smokers and collected qualitative data on the perceived costs and benefits of smoking and quitting. From these data we aimed to identify overall themes and to pinpoint all main perceived pros and cons of smoking and quitting for the specific subgroup of hard-core smokers.' (page 4)

'The experiences of former hard-core smokers may help us identify ways (e.g., tackling certain outcome beliefs; [23]) in which the current hard-core smokers could be targeted and motivated to participate in future interventions or clinical settings.' (page 5)

We merged the paragraph about the criteria into the method section:

'Previous studies identify three basic characteristics of hard-core smokers: relative high tobacco consumption, little intention to quit, and resilience to societal pressures as indicated by a relatively long smoking history. We translated these into six criteria for our screener. Smokers were defined as hard-core if they a) smoked every day [6, 21], b) smoked on average 15 cigarettes or more a day [6, 21], c) had not attempted to quit smoking in the past year [6, 14, 21, 22], d) were not planning to quit within 6 months [6, 14, 21, 22], e) had been smoking at least 15 years in their lifetime, and f) were 35 years or older. As for the last criterion, we selected these older smokers, because smoking related pros and cons tend to differ between younger and older
smokers [23]. They have surpassed young adulthood and have reached a stable smoking habit with commensurable smoking related cognitions.’ (page 5)

Finally, we merged the remainder of the current study section with the first part of the background and added one sentence to the last paragraph:

‘The aim of the current study was to gain insight into the perceived pros and cons of both smoking and smoking cessation in hard-core smokers.’ (page 4)

Comment 2
3. Patient selection (page 7) needs clarification to exclude selection bias. Was time or geographical availability the only selection criterion to exclude so many patients and end with 31 from 314 current hard-core smokers, and 32 from 132 former hard-core smokers?

Response
Time and geographical availability were indeed the only criteria to exclude participants after selection. We selected eligible participants through a short online questionnaire and then send them a confirmation invitation though email. Although many showed interest in the questionnaire, only few responded to the email invitation. We added the following text to clarify:

“(all focus groups were conducted in the same two cities, restricting our sample to those participants who lived nearby or were willing to travel far)” (page 6)

Comment 3
4. The methods section is very lengthy and might be shortened without losing significant information.

Response
We agree that the methods section needed some restructuring to improve the flow of the methods. First, we shortened this section by removing a number sentences that contained less significant information. For example, we shortened the following paragraph:

‘Each focus group lasted ± 150-180 minutes (including brief coffee breaks) and was divided into two parts. In the first part, we assessed the participants’ preferred style of communication in anti-smoking campaigns. These data are beyond the scope of this paper and will not be discussed here. The second part of the focus group (lasting ± 45-75 minutes) was devoted to the central aim of this study (i.e., the perceived pros and cons of both smoking and quitting). Each focus group was led by a moderator skilled in qualitative methods.’

This is now one sentence:

‘Each focus group lasted ± 45-75 minutes and was led by a moderator skilled in qualitative methods.’ (page 6-7)
In line with Referee 2, we also relocated the paragraphs in the ‘overview’ section. The following paragraph was moved to ‘participants’ in the methods:

All participants were aged 35-79 (M = 54.7, SD = 7.6) and groups sizes were 2-10. (...) At the start of the interview, all participants introduced themselves and all but two former smokers indicated the number of years they had quit. This ranged between 1.5 and 40 years (M = 10.0, SD = 8.1). Participants received compensation for their travel expenditures and an additional 45 euros for their participation. (page 6)

We moved the following paragraph to ‘procedure’ in the methods:

‘Using the standardized procedures of Goldman and Schmaltz [24], we conducted 11 focus group interviews among current hard-core smokers (n = 32) and former hard-core smokers (n = 31) in the Netherlands. We held separate focus groups for participants of low and high SES, because SES has shown to be an important factor in the outcome beliefs of smoking [25], and the prevalence of hard-core smokers is higher among those with a lower SES [6]. We based SES on the highest completed level of education (Dutch abbreviations in brackets), because education has shown to be a good predictor of SES in the Netherlands [26]. Low SES had primary education, lower secondary education (MAVO), or lower to middle level vocational education (LBO, MBO). High SES had higher secondary education (HAVO, VWO) or tertiary education (HBO, University). Of the 11 groups, 4 were conducted among low SES current hard-core smokers, 3 among high SES current hard-core smokers, 2 among low SES former hard-core smokers and 2 among high SES former hard-core smokers.’ (page 6)

All in all, the method section is now about half a page shorter, without having lost significant information.

Comment 4
5. Page 12-social environment. It sounds strange to me that partners (wife, husband, companion) have not been mentioned at all. This is in contrast to my experience in this field.

6. Similarly, concerns about sexual activity are not mentioned at all, although they are frequently expressed in everyday clinical practice and represent a strong message of antismoking campaigns.

Response
Some smokers did mention their partners, but may have referred to them in remarks like “smoking is bad for my social environment” and “smoking is bad for my loved ones”. We categorized these kind of comments in the Social Environment category. Partners were never mentioned explicitly. Participants did indeed not mention any concerns about sexual activity. We agree with the referee that sexual activity is frequently used in antismoking campaigns. If this would have been an issue for the participants, one explanation would be that the participants did not feel comfortable sharing this in a group of strangers. We now mention this in our discussion:
‘Some pros or cons may have been left unmentioned by participants, because of the group setting in which the interviews were carried out. For example, concerns about sexual activity have not been expressed, perhaps because participants did not feel comfortable sharing those. Also, there are topics (e.g., partners) that are not cited in this paper. These topics may have been implied in more general remarks about social environments, but were never mentioned explicitly.’ (page 17)

Comment 5
7. Results and Table 2. data according to SES are not provided.

Response
In our study we found no differences between the two SES groups. We considered presenting two tables: one representing the data for low SES and the other for high SES. However, since we found no difference between these groups, these tables will look very similar. Therefore, for matters of brevity, we did not provide data according to SES in Table 2. We now describe this in our Method section in ‘Analysis of the structured questionnaires’:

In Table 2, we present these data according to smoking status, but not according to SES group, because we found no relevant differences there. (page 8)
Referee 2

Comment 1

(...). In general, the manuscript is well-written, clearly and sensibly arranged, and easy to follow. In the Introduction authors clearly state the problem which they investigated and summarize relevant research to provide context. The Methods used are accurate and sufficiently described. The results are clearly presented and discussed on the ground of the relevant literature. At the end of the paper well justified conclusions are placed.

However, there are following concerns that might be addressed by authors prior the paper was accepted for publication.

Response
We thank the referee for her kind compliments.

Comment 2

1. In my opinion, the “Current study” section is unnecessary and includes a number of repetitions. Some information included there can be found in the other places of the paper and should be cut out (for instance the whole first paragraph, the first sentence of the second paragraph, the whole last paragraph). Besides, this subsection is rambling and difficult to follow, and should be removed.

   - The paragraph which regards the six criteria to select hard-core smokers could be for instance attached to the last paragraph of the participants subsection.
   - Besides, I suggest replacing the following information (suggested little changes included) to the Discussion section:

   “Former hard-core smokers who have successfully gone through the process of quitting might provide additional insights into the balance of motives to stop or to continue smoking. Current hardcore smokers, who have not yet permanently quit, might lack the experience to identify the crucial pros or cons that might tip the balance of motives from smoking continuation towards smoking cessation. The experiences of former hard-core smokers may help identify ways (e.g., tackling certain outcome beliefs; [23]) in which the current hard-core smokers could be targeted and motivated to participate in future interventions or clinical settings”.

   “Socioeconomic status (SES) is also an important factor in the outcome beliefs of smoking [24], and the prevalence of hard-core smokers is higher among those with a lower SES [6].”

   - The first sentence of the “Current study” subsection might replace the last sentence of the Background.

Response
We thank the referee for her suggestions for improving the background section. As the referee suggested, we removed two paragraphs from the ‘current study’ section:
We conducted focus groups with Dutch current and former hard-core smokers and collected qualitative data on the perceived costs and benefits of smoking and quitting. From these data we aimed to identify overall themes and to pinpoint all main perceived pros and cons of smoking and quitting for the specific subgroup of hard-core smokers. (page 4)

The experiences of former hard-core smokers may help us identify ways (e.g., tackling certain outcome beliefs; [23]) in which the current hard-core smokers could be targeted and motivated to participate in future interventions or clinical settings. (page 5)

We then merged the paragraph on the six criteria into the methods section:

Previous studies identify three basic characteristics of hard-core smokers: relative high tobacco consumption, little intention to quit, and resilience to societal pressures as indicated by a relatively long smoking history. We translated these into six criteria for our screener. Smokers were defined as hard-core if they a) smoked every day [6, 21], b) smoked on average 15 cigarettes or more a day [6, 21], c) had not attempted to quit smoking in the past year [6, 14, 21, 22], d) were not planning to quit within 6 months [6, 14, 21, 22], e) had been smoking at least 15 years in their lifetime, and f) were 35 years or older. As for the last criterion, we selected these older smokers, because smoking related pros and cons tend to differ between younger and older smokers [23]. They have surpassed young adulthood and have reached a stable smoking habit with commensurable smoking related cognitions. (page 5)

We shortened the paragraphs on former smokers in the background and relocated the paragraph on socioeconomic status to the discussion. We changed this paragraph somewhat:

We held different focus groups for low and high SES participants, because SES has shown to be an important factor in the outcome beliefs of smoking [38], and the prevalence of hard-core smokers is higher among those with a lower SES [6]. (page 15)

The remainder of the current study section was merged with the first part of the background. Consequently, our paper now no longer has a “Current Study” section. The first sentence of the former ‘Current Study’ section is now the last sentence of the background.

The aim of the current study was to gain insight into the perceived pros and cons of both smoking and smoking cessation in hard-core smokers. (page 5)

Comment 3
2. I suggest reorganizing the Methods section. As a first subsection I suggest placing “Participants”, following by “Procedure” subsection. The “Overview” subsection should be cut out and information included there replaced to other subsections.

- For instance: “All participants were aged 35-79 (M = 54.7, SD = 7.6).”, or „Participants
received compensation for their travel expenditures and an additional 45 euros for their participation" should be placed in the “Participants” subsection.

- Remaining information included in the “Overview” subsection (those regarding focus group interviews and dividing focus groups by authors according to SES defined by level of education) should be placed in the Procedure subsection.

Response
We reorganized the methods section the way the referee suggested. We removed the “Overview” header and relocated the sentences on the participants’ age and compensations to the ‘participants’ section. The remainder of the overview section was relocated to the ‘procedure’ section.

Comment 4
3. It is not clear what authors meant using in the paper the term (former) smokers. Using in the brackets the adjective former is somewhat confusing especially that it has not been used in the article consequently. For instance:
   a) The third paragraph of the “Current study: “Since this may influence the perceived pros and cons of smoking and quitting, we held different focus groups for (former) smokers of low and high SES”.
   b) The last paragraph of the “Current study”: “In the present study we investigated the perceived pros and cons of smoking and quitting among hard-core smokers by conducting a focus group study among low and high SES current hard-core smokers, and among low and high SES former hard-core smokers”.
   c) The second sentence of “Overview”: “We held separate focus groups for (former) smokers of low and high SES, based on the highest completed level of education (Dutch abbreviations in brackets).”

   If the term “(former) smokers” meant both former and current smokers (it becomes more probable along with reading the text) I would suggest using instead of it: participants, subjects or smokers.

Response
By the term “(former) smokers” we did indeed mean to indicate both current and former smokers. We now changed every instance of “(former) smokers” into “all participants”, as suggested by the referee.

Comment 5
4. Improper referring to references here and there in the article, for instance in the second paragraph of the “Current study” section the number 23 of the reference should be placed at the end of the sentence.

Response
We changed all instances in which the reference was not in the style of BMC Public Health.
Comment 6
5. For more clearness of the paper, I suggest place all quotations which regard main six categories of perceived pros and cons of smoking and smoking cessation in the separate table that could include for instance three columns: 1/ Categories of perceived pros and cons of smoking and smoking cessation, 2/ Exemplary quotation, 3/ Participant

Response
We agree with the reviewer that the quotations make the results section lengthy and perhaps a bit confusing. As the referee suggested, we now present the quotations in a separate table (Table 3). We refer to this table in the first paragraph of the results section.

‘Table 3 presents one example quotation for each main category.’ (page 9)

Comment 7
6. Table 1. I do not think the information on the significant difference between current and former mean age might be of any importance. If authors consider otherwise and decide to leave this information, the statistical test used should be mentioned in the Method section.

Response
We agree that information on the significance of the differences between age and years smoked may not be interesting to all readers. However, we believe it may help some readers interpret the results of our study. We agree with the referee that the statistical test we used should be mentioned in the text. We now do this in our methods section, when we describe Table 1.

‘We used t-tests to analyse differences between the two groups.’ (page 6)

Comment 8
7. Language needs a little improvement (e.g., in the Study limitations: “The aim our study was…”, in the Conclusions: “…should be taken in the account…”, etc.)

Response
We agree with the referee that the language needed some improvement. We removed all typos described above. Also, we made some further minor adjustments throughout the text to further improve readability of this paper. We finally added one sentence to the abstract:

‘Subsequently, each participant listed his or her main pros and cons in a questionnaire.’ (page 2)